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Home, About, Shop, Contact: Constructing an Authorial Persona via the Author Website

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Abstract

Introduction

Let me start by telling you about my "first-world problem": I study girls' autobiographical practice in digital spaces but the conceptual tools in my field have been developed chiefly in order to read and analyse printed books. Girls' digital engagements with self-representation—such as web comics and blogs—are fascinating texts and I want to know what they can tell us about how girls' written selves connect in complex ways to broader cultural constructions of girlhood.

The Greek roots of the word autobiography *autos*, *bios*, and *graphe* (self, life, writing) inform the kinds of approaches that have been taken to address the relationship between an autobiographical text and its author (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 1). Further, the understanding of autobiography as "self life writing" has shaped what kinds of texts get to be called autobiography and what texts are something else—identity work, media-making, or marginal textual practice. Fortunately, due to the proliferation of online activity that engages autobiographical modes of textual practice, life writing scholars are beginning to develop new tools in order to address these "texts"—blogs, tweets, status updates, avatars, and a variety of digital personas—to find out what they can tell us about cultural understandings of selfhood and what it means to communicate "real" life through media. One of these tools under construction is the idea of "automedia," which I will elaborate on below.

The same integration of digital spaces and platforms into daily life that is prompting the development of new tools in autobiography studies—which P. David Marshall has described as "the proliferation of the public self"—has also given rise to the field of persona studies, which addresses the ways in which individuals engage in practices of self-presentation in order to form commoditised identities that circulate in affective communities (Marshall 163). To the field of persona studies, this essay contributes an approach to the author website as a site of self-presentation that works to "package" an authorial persona for circulation within contemporary literary marketplaces. Significantly, I address these websites not as direct representations of a pre-existing self, but as automedial *texts* that need to be read and interpreted, and which work to construct the authorial self or persona.

I draw on theories of authorship to propose the "author website" as a genre of automedial representation that creates authorial personas for public consumption. Specifically, I consider the website of Erika Moen—a young, female author working in the medium of autobiographical comics—as a case study in order to explore the tensions between Moen's authorial self (as produced in the digital elements of erikamoen.com) and the other, more deliberately autobiographical, renderings of her self that appear in her comics. Although young cartoonists tend to position themselves as artists rather than authors, the recent academic and critical interest in the "graphic novel" form has resulted in a growing sense of these works as literary and their makers as authors. In thinking through this distinction, Andrew Bennett's suggestion that "asking 'what is an author?' is intimately related to the question 'what is literature?'" (118) points to why cartoonists, whose texts are part image and part text and only sometimes bound up as books, have not always been contextualised as authors.

Contemporary Authors and the Impetus to "Connect"

To have an identity as an author is distinct from being an author. It is one thing to sit at a desk doing the work of writing a book. Making oneself visible as an author is a very different kind of work. Writers are asked to present themselves as authors in a range of contexts such as writers' festivals, readings, book signings, interviews and book promotion tours, and this demand has increased with the rise of social media: writers are now expected to represent themselves across a variety of digital platforms, which currently include Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These events and spaces reflect changing reading practices in which readers wish to move beyond the "solitary act of reading" and to participate in literary communities (Johanson and Freeman, 304). Within these communities authors occupy a role that is part celebrity, part guru, and part (imagined) close friend. Johanson and Freeman, in considering the appeal of writers' festivals, argue "audiences seek genuine relationships with artists […] and are sensitive to a lack of authenticity on the part of the artist in the relationship" (306). Readers want to have access to authors: to get near to them, the *real* them. And this sets up the expectation of a two-way street in which there is pressure on authors to also be participants and to grant readers the access they desire.

Author websites are one way that writers respond to the call to make themselves visible and accessible *as* authors within literary communities, and this call is often framed as an impetus to "connect with" an audience. But the primary function of the author website is to exploit readers' fascination with the author in order to sell books. In neoliberal cultures the pressure is on for all kinds of people to use online tools and spaces to commoditise their self-representation by cultivating a "self-brand," and, to varying degrees of alarm, disgust, or pragmatism, this is certainly one way that the author is conceptualised: as a brand name (See Australian Society of Authors; Evers; Force; and Rankin). The author as brand name guarantees and markets a reading experience particular to that brand. As with many other commodities, author brands are a mechanism for organising books into categories with identifiable traits in order that readers/consumers may identify which books appeal to their reading tastes and choose their purchases accordingly. It is as Michel Foucault remarks in answer to the question "What is an Author?": it is "a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses" (159). Digital spaces in particular are seen as opportunities for authors to create an "online presence" by communicating themselves as a brand on a website.

I am proposing that we might look at how these websites draw on intimate modes of self-representation to create an author-subject that is knowable to a reading public, and to think about how the features of these sites and their digital contexts shape the kinds of authorial personas that can be produced in the medium of the author website. In order to do this, I now want to turn to the field of auto/biography studies in which there is a growing body of work that considers a range of online modes of self-representation as texts that can be read, analysed and understood within a broader framework of auto/biographical practices (*autobiography* is sometimes written with a slash, as in, *auto/biography* in order to acknowledge both biography and autobiography within a range of textual practices that broadly deal with life narrative).

It is worth mentioning here that there is much diversity within author websites, and not all of them work to facilitate a connection with the reader. In fact, some work conversely to distance the author or to shroud them in mystery, among a range of other functions and formats. These sites of resistance to the pressure to "connect" are just as interesting in the context of finding out how online spaces are used to construct authors, however, there is not room to explore them here.

The Author Website: An Automedial Genre

In order to address new forms of (chiefly digital) self-representation that go beyond the printed book, scholars working in the field of auto/biography studies have proposed the concept of "automedia" as an alternative to terms such as autobiography, life writing or life narrative. Leading memoir and life narrative theorist Julie Rak (2013) argues that the concept of autobiography—and the ways that scholars have approached the genre—has been dominated by ideas of "narrative" and "writing" that are ill-suited to reading and analysing many online modes of self-representation. For example, although we might have trouble trying to read a Facebook wall or a Second Life avatar as "an autobiography" in the traditional sense, these performances of self-identity demonstrate ways in which users are taking up technology in order to engage in the business of autobiographical representation. And they are interesting for what they might be able to tell us about cultural understandings of selfhood and what it means to "live" a "life." Rak proposes that these texts, which move beyond the medium of the written word, and which are not necessarily crafted (or read) as a story or narrative, might be studied not as autobiography but instead as auto*media*.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson also point to automedia as a way of approaching autobiographical texts in a way that emphasizes how the telling or *mediation* of a life actually shapes the kind of story that can be told about it. They state that "media cannot simply be conceptualized as "tools" for presenting a preexisting, essential self. … Media technologies do not just transparently present the self. They constitute and expand it" ("Virtually Me" 77).

So we might understand an automedial approach as a way of studying auto/biographical texts (of a variety of forms) that take into account how the effects of media shape the kinds of selves that can be represented, and which understands the self not as a preexisting subject that might be distilled into story form but as an entity that is brought into being through the processes of mediation. In my conceptualisation, this approach understands that the self does not exist outside of mediation,

and it seeks to comprehend how the processes of (auto-)mediation shape selfhood both in individual terms (by analysing a particular automedial text to understand how it constructs the specific subject of that text) and in more general terms (how conventions and practices of different kinds of media shape and reflect cultural ideas of the self).

As such, I do not think that automedia as an approach to autobiographical texts need be limited to digital media—after all, books are still media. But the modes of self-representation being taken up in online contexts present scholars with urgent questions about what it means to represent life and the self in increasingly social, networked, multi-media ways.

The author website is an increasingly valuable tool for making writers visible as authors in online environments; but how are they automedial? By creating a mediated construction of an authorial persona that functions as a space in which readers (or to be more inclusive, *internet users*) can move around and experience the author's mediated persona, the author website draws on strategies of auto/biographical representation in order to respond to a demand for personal access to the author.

The author website works to create an often interactive space of contact between the writer as author and the public, where an audience (or internet user) is able to explore the author as he or she is constructed by his or her website. In order to explore how this kind of analysis might begin, I will turn to comics artist Erika Moen and her website erikamoen.com.

Case Study: Erika Moen's Authorial Persona

Erika Moen is a self-published comics author based in the US. Her online diary comic *DAR!: A Super-Girly Top Secret Comic Diary* (2003-2009) grew out of her printed mini comics about coming out as lesbian. Moen's website erikamoen.com is a good example of a highly developed automedial space, and it works to construct her as a comics author by offering for public consumption an authorial persona that functions as a brand, packaging and marketing her work. This case study is compelling for two reasons. Firstly, the graphic medium that Moen works in is particularly suited to the current moment in Web 2.0 history in which images—often in conjunction with words—are increasingly central. Secondly, the autobiographical nature of her work makes for interesting tensions between the authorial persona that is represented on her website and the autobiographical subject of her comics. For autobiographical authors, the call for them to be accessible to the public takes on an extra dimension. A consistent author brand should maintain an alignment between the kind of work they produce and their persona. In the case of autobiographical writers, their persona is anchored in a textual representation of their real-life self, so this allows us to think about the different functions of these two constructions, and the ways they speak to each other (or don't).

Moen is credited with generating the content of the site; however, her website was designed by a web designer and is based on a blog format. Although Moen's site is much more than a blog, the blog format is evident as an influence on the design of the site which comprises nine pages: "Home," "Art Portfolio," "Comics," "About," "Events and Appearances," "Press," "Blog," "Shop," and "Contact." In a broader consideration of this kind of author website, the four pages Home, About, Shop, and Contact, represent the key functions that these sites perform. The home page grounds the site, giving the user a first impression and overview of the author brand. "About" is the place that users can find biographical information. The site's shop indicates the context of the space as a site that occurs within commercial networks of production and consumption, and which also works to disguise the commoditisation of the author by delineating a separate space for commerce that focuses on their *work* as the object for sale. The "Contact" page provides further channels for "connecting" with the author. The focus of this essay is Moen's "Home" page (Figure 1).

The home page anchors the site and works to create a professional persona for Moen that draws heavily on her autobiographical voice and cartoon style (which she has honed in her works *DAR!* and *Oh Joy Sex Toy).* It is highly significant that the face that welcomes the user to the site is not a photographic image of Moen but rather her cartoon avatar, which greets users with an assured and friendly smile. Those familiar with her work will recognise this picture as Moen. If readers fail to make this connection, there are clickable headings immediately to the right of the figure that use the first-person voice: the headings invite the user to "check out *my* work" and ask them "what am *I* up to?" (my emphasis). Taking a cue from the comic medium, the user might associate the proximity of the image of the cartoon girl to these statements, and read the two elements cohesively like a comics panel, understanding that the girl is the speaker, and the speaker is the author Erika Moen.

Moen, as the author constructed by the website, almost always addresses the reader in this chatty, informal voice which echoes the voice she uses in her comics. On the home page, the reader is asked several questions and all of these appear in close proximity to the drawing of Moen. In addition to the one mentioned above, the reader is asked if they are "Looking to purchase some art?" and whether they "Want to see what I've created?" Instead of using labels here, the website uses questions addressed to the reader, and these appear clustered around the cartoon image of Moen which is rendered in her style. These questions draw the reader into an implied conversation, and they also suggest a presence or speaker behind the screen which, prompted by the cartoon Erika, the reader is encouraged to imagine as Erika Moen. This illusion of two-way communication invites the reader to experience the site as a personal encounter, and Moen's perky, friendly voice that speaks intimately to her readers about her latest activities, products and appearances is the thread that sews together the different spaces of the site as well as Moen's published work.

Above the drawn image of Moen appear the words "Erika Moen" in a large "handwritten" font that dominates the screen. The illusion of handwriting here is significant. Hilary Chute, a scholar of autobiographical comics, in her book *Graphic Women* argues that handwriting constitutes an important autobiographical act on the part of the comic memoirist. She states that handwriting "underscores the subjective personality of the author" and acts as "a trace of autobiography in the mark of its maker" (10-11). Indeed, handwriting is often read as a sign of humanity and authenticity that is understood in opposition to the machined construction of computer generated fonts. The idea that handwriting can be traced back to an individual and that personal traits can be discovered by decoding a person's handwriting are ideas that reflect an autobiographical reading of handwriting and its place within textual culture. In this context, on the website of a comics artist, in addition to referencing the medium of cartoons, it also signals these ideas about authenticity and autobiography, and it implies the human behind the digital text.

Everything on the home page is a product of Moen herself and each element communicates her persona as an indie, DIY, self-published cartoonist: each image that appears on the home page is drawn by her hand; her voice inflects the majority of the text on the page; some of the writing appears in a handwritten font; even, the bio states, her degree from Pitzer College is "self-made."

Moen's Home page is an automedial space that facilitates a connection between author and reader that is grounded in the commoditised networks of persona production and consumption: the site serves not only to encourage the reader to buy Moen's autobiographical comics, but effectively to "buy into" her personal brand. It constructs a persona that draws on a combination of visual and textual signals which at once connect Moen to her comics works and also encourage readers to feel as if they "know" Erika: her name in handwriting, her comics portrait which welcomes the reader, and the subheadings that draw the reader into a conversation. Although there is much more to explore on Moen's website, in order to demonstrate some key considerations of an automedial approach I have examined several significant elements of the homepage which form the basis for a fuller reading of the site.

Conclusion

This essay sits at the burgeoning intersection of autobiography studies and digital media studies, and is part of an attempt to understand how digital media practices impact on what kinds of self-representation are produced and consumed. In this way, it contributes to the field of persona studies, which is also invested in exploring systems that facilitate the "presentation of the self that are now ubiquitous in contemporary culture" (Barbour & Marshall). I have suggested that the author website can be read as a genre of automedia in order to explore how these digital spaces—which are embedded in networks of literary production and consumption—draw on auto/biographical strategies to construct an authorial persona that works to sell books by connecting with an audience. This essay works towards further research on paratextual sites that can tell us more about how writers are constructed as authors in the contemporary literary landscape, and I have proposed that a consideration of the deployment and construction of authorial personas is integral to understanding "the author" in this cultural moment.

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